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2 U. S. Ships Enter Soviet Waters Off Crimea to Gather Intelligence

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WASHINGTON, March 18 — Two United States warships heavily equipped with electronic sensors entered Soviet territorial waters in the Black Sea last week to test Soviet defenses, Pentagon officials said.

The officials said that the exercise had been ordered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the name of Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and that a similar exercise was planned in the Gulf of Sidra off Libya next week.

The purpose of the exercises, the officials said, is to gather intelligence, to assert the right to innocent passage and, in the case of Libya, to assert the right to sail in international waters.

The officials spoke after the Soviet Union, in a protest note, said the incident, off the southern Crimea, "was of a demonstrative, defiant nature and pursued clearly provocative aims."

The naval base of Sevastopol, headquarters of the Soviet Union's Black Sea Fleet, is in the southern Crimea.

The Pentagon said in a statement that the entry of the ships into Soviet waters "was simply an exercise of the right of innocent passage."

Edward P. Djerejian, a White House spokesman, was asked whether the maneuver was provocative, in light of efforts to seek a summit meeting.

U.S. Denies Provocative Intent

"Absolutely not," the spokesman said. "There is no intent for it to be provocative or defiant. It is simply an exercise of the right of innocent passage. This transit was, to the best of our knowledge, consistent with relevant Soviet law."

The Pentagon officials said the Black Sea maneuver and the planned exercise off Libya were also intended to buttress President Reagan's appeal to Congress for approval of an increase in military spending in fiscal year 1987, which begins Oct. 1.

In previous incidents in which the United States flexed its military muscle, the officials said, the President's popularity jumped and his policies received new support in Congress.

The Pentagon officials said that, in the planned exercise off Libya next week, three aircraft carriers — the Saratoga, the America and the Coral Sea — intended to send fighter planes into the airspace over the Gulf of Sidra.

Libya considers the entire gulf as part of its territorial waters; the United States does not recognize that claim. So far, the Navy has not tried to send any warships into the gulf.

United States warships pass through the Turkish straits from the Mediterranean Sea into the Black Sea two or three times a year, Pentagon officials said.

In the latest exercise, the guided missile cruiser Yorktown and the destroyer Caron entered the Black Sea on March 10 and left last Monday.

The Yorktown is equipped with an Aegis fire control system that can track hostile planes, ships and submarines and can select, aim and fire the weapons best suited to destroy each target. The ship also carries helicopters to gather information.

The Caron, which has been dispatched to gather intelligence on Central America, is also designed to fight planes, ships and submarines. Pentagon officials said the ship had been loaded with additional sensors and listening devices.

Last Thursday, the officials said, the ships passed within six miles of the Crimea. The Soviet Union claims terri-

torial waters up to 12 nautical miles. International maritime practice permits warships to pass through territorial waters in a direct line to save time and sailing distance.

No operations, such as flight or gunnery drills, are permitted during innocent passage, and Pentagon officials said none had been conducted. But listening to Soviet transmissions or sensing radar activity would not come under the rules of innocent passage, the officials suggested.

The American ships conducted a similar intelligence operation in December, the officials said. The United States last exerted the right of

innocent passage in those waters in November 1984, the Pentagon statement said.

Soviet ships periodically steam close to the United States and Soviet military planes often fly along the East Coast on the way to Cuba, according to the Pentagon. Last September, Soviet warships came within 40 miles of the coast in the Gulf of Mexico, the closest since they began deploying ships in the Caribbean in 1969.